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Time, Materiality, and History in UK-Based Interfaith Solidarity Work

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, building upon ethnographic fieldwork conducted among members of one initiative of Jewish-Muslim dialogue in the UK, I discuss how my interlocutors thematize the temporal dimension of anti-minority discrimination and perceive remaining historical material heritage associated with it. Using the example of problematic artifacts pertaining to mediaeval Lincoln, such as the so-called “shrine of Little Hugh,” I discuss how in engaging the memory of traumatic past events in Jewish history activists of inter-faith dialogue reflect on their current conditions of minoritization and attempt a projection of their communities’ lives in the UK in the future. I also borrow insight from the presentist theoretical framework in anthropology of time to highlight the impact my interlocutors’ life histories have had on the way they relate to and conceptualize their own and other minoritized groups’ histories and imagine their personal and collective futures based on their experiences in the present. I suggest that in these reflections, narratives of positive historical trajectories in the minority experience sit alongside an anticipation of multiple possible futures, some inflected with anxiety about a repetition of difficult pasts, others imbued with a vision connecting the past, present and future of minoritized communities into a common presence.

Keywords: heritage, interfaith, solidarity, Jewish-Muslim dialogue



In the past decade, British and broader European political discourses have involved a range of debates drawing attention to the conditions of discrimination of minoritized groups, as well as to the historical circumstances that had led to the emergence of these conditions. From the Black Lives Matter movement to initiatives in the decolonization of university curricula, the European public was invited to reflect on the historical and current experiences of marginalization and prejudice that minority communities have faced.

Some of the public analyses of the minority experience involved a strong comparative dimension, seeking to make a distinction between the positionalities of different groups. To note just a few examples, in the UK, the years from 2018 to 2022 saw an on-going discussion about whether institutions should adopt specific definitions of antisemitism and Islamophobia to ensure that the particularities of anti-Jewish and anti-Muslim prejudice were adequately challenged through the codes of practice of different public bodies. In 2021, the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities Report controversially recommended disaggregating the term BAME (Black, Asian and minority ethnic), commonly used in institutional solidarity networks, on the grounds that it was allegedly not fit adequately to represent persons coming from a broad range of migrant identities. Relatedly, and sometimes, in conjunction with the comparative analyses of the conditions of marginalization of ethnic and religious minorities, a proportion of public discussions revolved around material representations of these groups' histories (Mookherjee 2022), colonial legacies of museums (Hicks 2020), and, more broadly, ways to address what Sharon Macdonald has described as "difficult heritage" understood as a past that does not lend itself to positive accounts of national hegemonic identities (Macdonald 2010).

In this paper, I will attempt to contribute both to academic discussions of public debates about relational subalternities of minoritized groups, and to the growing literature on heritage, aesthetics and materiality pertaining to minority histories by focusing on the perspectives of those community members whose contributions do not make news headlines. The empirical focus of the paper is on a grassroots UK-based initiative in Jewish-Muslim dialogue and the way its members respond to and theorize the problematics of the artifacts related to medieval Jewish history. My theoretical focus in presenting this material lies in two areas. Firstly, I highlight the temporal dimension of my interlocutors' thematization of historical artifacts that belong to the past which is seemingly quite distant, and discuss how in engaging the remnants of traumatic events in Jewish history and memories evoked by them, activists of inter-faith dialogue reflect on their communities' current conditions of minoritization. Secondly, the paper brings attention to the multidirectional (Rothberg 2009)¹ and solidarity-based approach that they demonstrate in sharing these

reflections, attempting a projection of their communities' lives in the UK in the future in ways that consider the experiences of minoritized communities in Europe alongside each other.

Time and Memory

The first two decades of the twenty-first century have witnessed the emergence of a plethora of initiatives in interfaith and broader inter-community dialogue in the UK, some of which focused specifically on the relationship and interactions between the Jewish and the Muslim communities. In the period from 2013 to 2023, I was following one such initiative which brings together residents of one city for the purposes of mutual education and learning about the traditions of Judaism and Islam and reflection on the common challenges that Jewish and Muslim British citizens face as minoritized groups.² The group would normally meet once every few weeks to attend a meal, celebrate a festival from the Jewish and Muslim calendars, discuss a topic of mutual interest or concern, or go on a trip to a place that has played a significant role in British Jewish and/or Muslim histories.

One of the out-of-town trips that I took together with the members of the network was to Lincoln, an old cathedral city in the East Midlands which takes a prominent place in medieval Jewish history. Until the expulsion of the Jewish population from England at the end of the thirteenth century, Lincoln was home to a significant Jewish community. Jewish residents subsequently started settling in Lincoln in small numbers beginning from the eighteenth century onwards, but a proper new Jewish congregation was re-established in the city only in 1992, holding meetings in a building dating back to 1300, which some historians consider to be the site of a medieval synagogue.³

A big part of the day was taken with a tour of the Lincoln Cathedral and a walk in the old part of the city. Marcus Roberts, a heritage specialist and the founding director of the National Anglo-Jewish Heritage Trail, observes that the medieval Jewish history of Lincoln remains remarkably visible in terms of the popular memories of prominent Jewish residents, surviving stone houses that once were home to Jewish families, and, tragically, the history of the infamous blood libel of "Little Hugh."

During the visit to the Cathedral, our guide showed us a number of artifacts reflective of the Jewish history of Lincoln and its complex relationship with the Cathedral and its parishioners. Historians suggest that when the Cathedral was all but completely destroyed in the earthquake in 1185, it was rebuilt with loans provided by Aaron of Lincoln, one of the city's Jewish residents. The Cathedral contains the burial place of St. Hugh of Avalon, a bishop who acted as a protector of local Jewish communities and thus arguably played a positive role in Lincoln's Jewish history. Heritage specialists also point out that some of the artwork in the Cathedral presents elements of the

Jewish tradition which could be seen as examples of positive Christian engagement with Jewish theology.⁴

One of the artifacts documenting the much more disturbing dimensions of the medieval history of Jewish Lincoln is the remains of the shrine of Little Hugh, a figure at the centre of one of the most notorious cases of European blood libel accusations, which had particularly damaging and long-lasting effects (Rose 2015, 9). “Little Hugh” was an eight-year-old boy who allegedly was found dead in 1255 and whose murder (if this individual even existed) was baselessly blamed on the Jewish community for the purposes of economic extortion (Rose 2022), resulting in a number of Jewish persons being executed and having their assets confiscated by Henry III. The “shrine” of Little Hugh was most probably constructed in the period from 1290 to 1295 (Stocker 1986, 113) under the patronage of Edward I, who was responsible for the expulsion of the Jewish populations from the kingdom in 1290 and was therefore keen to “document” their alleged proclivity for criminality (Rose 2015, 226). The myth of Little Hugh featured in Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* and circulated around Europe for centuries in popular ballads and folk songs (Rose 2022).⁵ The shrine was destroyed during the Civil War, but the tomb, which is deeply embedded into the structure of the Cathedral, remains, now bearing a notice written as a result of a collaborative project between the Lincolnshire Jewish community, JTrails and Lincoln Cathedral, addressing the tragic history of blood libels.

During the tour, I was walking next to Hannah, one of the members of our group, whom I had only met once several years before. Hannah told me that she had not had an opportunity to attend the meetings of the network for a long time, but did not want to miss this trip, because she had never been to Lincoln and did not know much about its Jewish history. When we were shown by our guide the remains of the shrine, Hannah found their sight disturbing, even though she appreciated the interfaith-based collaborative effort that went into the creation of a notice accompanying it. Hannah looked visibly unsettled and had to temporarily take a break from our tour. As she was leaving the area where the tomb was installed, she said that it was incredible to think how long ago anti-Jewish prejudice goes back to and how much of it there was still around. Her words made me think of a conversation I once had with one of my long-term interlocutors Jacob, when we were talking about the modern history of the Jewish communities in the UK. “Don’t forget when you write up the book that English Jewish history actually dates back to the Middle Ages, but the entire Jewish population was expelled in the thirteenth century. I know it is not modern history though and it may not be relevant for your study... Anyway, I personally think the thirteenth century happened only yesterday,” he said (inevitably) jokingly, but also poignantly.

Anthropologists have for decades observed divergent conceptualizations of time and debated the theoretical implications of these divergences for our understanding of temporality, highlighting the social and relational nature of time as a category (Ssorin-Chaikov 2017, Kirtsoglou and Simpson 2020, 3). Johannes Fabian famously argued in his classical *Time and the Other* against what he described as anthropologists' tendency to deny coevalness to the people they study, or in other words, to describe them as groups inhabiting different time frames, often time frames associated with the past. Other anthropologists have complicated this approach. Talal Asad observed that individuals in diverse societies live by multiple and differing temporalities which shape their political responses and often go well beyond the homogenous understandings of time promoted by the state (Asad 2003, 5). In more recent scholarship, Erica Weiss and Nissim Mizrachi documented how temporalities of peace have been conceptualized differently in liberal mainstream and non-liberal Jewish-Palestinian peace initiatives (Weiss and Mizrachi 2019). David Henig in his analysis of the role of Islam in the everyday lives of the citizens of post-Yugoslav societies argues that the secular forward-moving temporality favored in scholarship should be paralleled with reasoning derived from Islamic temporal cosmologies, as these differing "temporal orientations are entangled and generate configurations of temporal reasoning in a given historical-political nexus" (Henig 2020, 93). Building upon this insight, Geoffrey Hughes, points out that while following Fabian it is right to caution anthropologists against denying their interlocutors coevalness, they should also be attentive to their interlocutors refusing coevalness by rejecting the temporalizations offered by the anthropologist or their other contemporaries, and points out that scholars engaging marginalized groups have documented what Paul Gilroy has described as "the distinctive and disjunctive temporality of the subordinated" (Gilroy 1993, 212 quoted in Hughes 2023, 2).

To return to Hannah's engagement with Jewish history, I suggest that in reflecting on the position of Jewish British citizens in the twenty-first century she deploys mainstream secular notions of time and progress, rather than, for instance, conceptualizations of temporality stemming from Jewish theological cosmologies. However, I suggest that while moving within secular temporal frameworks, she also rejects coevalness with her secular/Christian contemporaries on account of her experiences of living as a Jewish person in the UK in the present. In other terms, Hannah fully appreciates the temporal gap between current and medieval English Jewish history but struggles to reconcile the sheer chronological enormity of this gap with her experiences of the dominant society failing fully to commit to securing the well-being of Jewish communities in Britain. Her theorization of Jewish British histories, which appears to be allochronic in relation to the histories of the

dominant community, stems from her experiences in the present, rather than from divergent theological frameworks or an abstract philosophical standpoint. At the same time, one can argue that as is also the case with the examples discussed by Henig, the temporal reasoning which informs different understandings of and responses to anti-Jewish prejudice is always an outcome of temporal entanglements produced by the specificities of their historical, theological and political contexts.⁶

Congruently, Felix Ringel makes a call for anthropologists to adopt a presentist theoretical framework as an analytical approach which problematizes the determining role of the past and highlights the multiple and indeterminate variations of agency that individuals exercise in relation to time.⁷ This approach also encourages ethnographers to attend more thoroughly to the references to the future indexed in their research participants' life histories (Ringel 2016). I suggest that this analytical avenue can be productively pursued to help us understand some of the perspectives on Jewish history that I described above, when my interlocutors refer to their experiences in the present or make projections about their personal or collective futures when talking about the persecution of the Jewish people in the past.

In this respect, the myth about Little Hugh itself provides a poignant reminder about the longevity of medieval anti-Jewish imagery that makes it hard to dismiss the "shrine" as an unfortunate object left over from the thirteenth century that bears no reflection on the attitudes of contemporary publics. While the myth obviously originated in a string of events that took place in the thirteenth century, it continued not only to circulate in much more recent history, but also to acquire new materialities as late as the twentieth and the twenty-first centuries. For instance, in 1910, the house known as Jews Court was purchased by an individual who was keen to commercially exploit the associations that it had with the story of Little Hugh, as the building was known as one of the sites that may have contained the well where the body of the boy was allegedly found. Unable to locate the well, the new owner instructed the builders who were carrying out the renovations for him to dig up a well in the basement. When the building eventually opened to the public, the owner invited the visitors to see "St. Hugh's Well" for an entrance fee and issued a postcard depicting, as the caption read, "St. Hugh's Well, Jew's Court, Lincoln" (Morrell 1993).

In 1925, a school was established in Lincolnshire, which featured a ball flying over a wall on its logo in memory of Little Hugh, as according to some ballads the boy was murdered after he went to the garden of a neighboring Jewish family to retrieve a ball which went over their wall. In 2020, the ball was removed from the school's logo following a complaint from a member of the public who approached the *Jewish Chronicle* and the school's headmaster pointing out the association that the logo had with

the blood libel. Though the ball was removed from the logo, the wall, however, bewilderingly, remained.⁸

In Lincoln Cathedral, the notice accompanying the tomb of “Little Hugh” largely repeated the traditional libel up until as late as 1959, when it was replaced by the then Dean with a new one withdrawing the libel. A more appropriately detailed notice, developed in collaboration with the Jewish community of Lincoln, was put on the wall only in 2008. On a visit to Lincoln in 2023, I overheard a tour guide talk about the tale of Little Hugh as a shameful legacy for which the Cathedral had apologized, but the guide would still refer to Little Hugh as a saint, which is erroneous, as he was never canonized. Emily Rose’s research also suggests that his burial place in the Cathedral was never in fact a shrine, but a memorial tabernacle, and that the “cult” of Little Hugh was re-discovered (or, more correctly, invented) in Victorian times (Rose 2022), demonstrating how historical memories stemming from the Middle Ages can be used and re-imagined for problematic purposes and political visions by non-Jewish groups.

During the walk that our group took through the old streets of Lincoln, we could not help but notice the artifacts that visually reminded the visitors about the Jewish history of the city. Two medieval buildings thought by historians to have been associated with the city’s Jewish residents bear the prominently displayed signs of “Jews House” and “Jews Court.” The rooftop of one of the old buildings bears a tile, which, as we learnt from our guide, was a replica of a medieval tile, now housed in Lincoln Museum, possibly representing an image of a Jewish resident. Several members of our group, both Jewish and Muslim, expressed surprise that this image was allowed to stay on the roof on full display. Similar concern is echoed in Roberts’s observation that the labelling of the remains of the buildings that may have housed Jewish residents as “Jews House” and “Jews Court” was unhelpful, as it could “reinforce the idea of the ‘difference’ and ‘separateness’ of Jews that was a foundation of traditional Christian anti-Semitism.”⁹

When I returned to Lincoln several years later and took a closer look at the former building, I learnt that it was a restaurant. The building bore a plaque on a side wall mentioning its early history and the possible ownership of the house by a Jewish individual. The plaque ended with a statement noting that the treatment of the Jewish population of Lincoln, who were subjected to blood libel accusations, persecution and expulsion in 1290, was “disgraceful.” The statement may have come from a place of good intentions, but the neutrally informative tone of the rest of the notice and its title, which in large characters read “Welcome To The Jews House Restaurant” seemed to be commercially exploitative, incongruous with the grave nature of the events described in the final sentence, and generally illustrative of Roberts’s concerns about reinforcing the notion of the alleged Jewish difference.

Anthropologists have discussed how objects and materialities can act as embodiments of past lives causing past and present temporalities to merge into one (Kirtsoglou and Simpson 2020, 8, Navaro-Yashin 2012, Bryant 2014, Pipyrrou 2014, Demetriou 2015). Arguably, objects such as the restaurant inscription and the roof tile contribute to the mosaic of modern and contemporary materialities which combine a throw-back to time-old anti-Jewish imageries with a (re)invention of new ones, forcing Jewish British citizens, and by implication, other minorities, to re-live the past in the present, as I could see during our visit in the reactions of both Jewish and Muslim participants of the tour.

I suggest this episode illuminates the way minoritized groups can reflect on European Jewish history, seeing it as a reference point for minoritized groups reflecting on their present experiences. It also highlights that these reflections are bound to be a two-way process, as they both inform individuals' understandings of contemporary experiences of minoritization and are, in turn, shaped by these experiences. When after my visit to Lincoln I had an opportunity to ask one of my Jewish interlocutors what in his view would have been the best way to deal with the problematic artifacts of the Cathedral, which included not only the so-called "shrine" but also other antisemitic imagery, he was adamant that despite the deeply unsettling nature of these artifacts, they should stay on full display rather than be hidden or removed, as doing so would mean whitewashing the history of Christian antisemitism in England. His response thus appears to be different from that of some of the participants in our group, who were surprised to see remnants of anti-Jewish artifacts in Lincoln and suggested that they should have been removed. Yet, I argue that these divergent reactions to the "difficult heritage" of Lincoln importantly point both to the immensity of the tragedies that Jewish history in England has involved and to the impossibility of redressing the injustices of the past by focusing purely on the material representations of problematic legacies without addressing the marginalization and othering that minoritized groups experience at the moment.

In other terms, some of the current materialities called on to highlight the Jewish presence in medieval Lincoln might have been presented differently today, if the general levels of public awareness of the damaging nature of racist stereotyping were higher. Indeed, as Erica Lehrer discussed in her analysis of representations of Jewish images in museums, offensive depictions contain "implicit threats of violence" towards marginalized groups (Lehrer 2020, 305). At the same time, Hannah's response to the "shrine" of the Little Hugh might have been different had her own experiences been void of prejudice, and the tile may have had a less unsettling effect on our group if stigmatizing imageries aimed at racialized minorities were not still in wide circulation. As Kirtsoglou and Simpson put it, "Living

in the same clock-time, or even in the same broad space in terms of physical geography, means very little in terms of inhabiting a common, coeval presence” with techniques of unequal power distribution forcing some people to live in different time frames from others (Kirtsoglou and Simpson 2020, 12). Arguably, the experiences of marginalization that are imposed upon minoritized groups foist on them alternative temporalities, which state-sponsored discourses and the dominant society then at the same time refuse to recognize as allochronic to those of their own temporalities. However, as I discussed in the paper, subaltern groups can themselves deny coevalness to their contemporaries as they refuse to go along with the narratives that see them and the majority society as inhabiting coeval presence. Instead, they affirm common presence with members of other minoritized groups in ways that engage the past, the present and the future.

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notes and references

¹The multidirectional memory framework proposed by Michael Rothberg explores the multiple ideational transfers taking place in acts of remembrance surrounding experience of extreme violence and argues against a logic of competitive suffering. Focusing on the memorialization of the Holocaust and other forms of genocide, Rothberg has suggested that the rise of Holocaust memory in Europe and globally, provided a conceptual horizon for the articulation of other histories of persecution, discrimination and violence, even if public attention to some of these histories remained deficient, arguing that this framework could allow comparison between the particularities of different groups’ historical experiences without retreating into competitive accounts of victimhood (2009: 100).

²The topic of the relational portrayal of specifically Jewish and Muslim populations in Europe has also been attracting growing attention of historians, anthropologists and other social scientists who have explored the intersections between imageries that have become associated with the two groups (for some of the key contributions see, for instance Anidjar 2008; Everett 2020; Everett 2022; Judaken 2018; Katz

2015; Klug 2014; Mandel 2016; Meer 2013; Renton and Gidley 2017), as well as the overlapping experiences of Jewish and Muslim constituencies (see, for instance, Arkin 2013, Arkin 2018, Egorova 2022, 2024a, 2024b, Everett 2018, Everett and Gidley 2018, Kasstan 2022, Mandel 2008, Özyürek 2023, Sheldon 2022, Silverstein 2018, Werbner 2013).

³<http://jtrails.org.uk/trails/lincoln/history> (accessed on 17 June 2023).

⁴<http://jtrails.org.uk/trails/lincoln/history> (accessed on 17 June 2023).

⁵For a detailed discussion of the history of the myth of Little Hugh, see Stocker (1986), for a broader discussion and analysis of the history of blood libels see Rose (2015).

⁶For instance, the reality of medieval blood libels may have informed the ritualistic temporality of the Passover seder. As the historian Emily Rose suggests, in later Middle Ages the proliferation of stories about ritual murder was the ostensible cause for the inclusion by the Jewish communities of a practice of opening the door in the middle of the seder, the practice which survived in the Passover Haggadah as a ritual performed to welcome the prophet Elijah (Rose 2015, 143).

- ⁷ See also Bernstein (1994) for an earlier discussion expressing a congruent point specifically in relation to Jewish history.
- ⁸ <https://www.thejc.com/news/lincolnshire-school-to-drop-95-year-old-logo-after-jc-points-out-antisemitic-blood-libe-l-connection-sut88656>.
- ⁹ <http://jtrails.org.uk/trails/lincoln/history> (accessed on 17 June 2023).
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